DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 246 702 HE 017 088

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TITLE Higher Education and Social Change: The Continuing Impact of the Sixties.
INSTITUTION State Univ. of New York, Old Westbury. Coll. at Old Westbury.
PUB DATE Dec 83
NOTE 7p.
PUB TYPE Collected Works - Serials (022) -- Viewpoints (120)
JOURNAL CIT DOXA: Newsletter of the Structured Year Program; v2 n2 Nov-Dec 1983

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Change Agents; *College Role; *Educational Opportunities; Higher Education; Open Enrollment; Political Influences; *Social Change

ABSTRACT

Major issues that emerged in the interplay of higher education and society in the 1960s and are relevant today are considered in a newsletter article. It is noted that the social movements of the 1960s that began on the campus continue to fundamentally change society, and these changes will also force higher education to play a different role in the future. The growth of two-year colleges is seen as an attempt to cope with the open admissions policy. It is concluded that, like society as a whole, higher education is having a difficult time and must fend off external forces that want to use it for repressive political reasons. (SW)

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NEWSLETTER OF THE STRUCTURED YEAR PROGRAM

State University of New York
College at Old Westbury

Volume 2, No. 2 November/December 1983

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DOXA

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by Paul Welcher

Education, as a social institution, includes far more than the formal schooling characterized by higher education. As a social institution it shares with the family the primary function of the socialization of the young and the transmission of culture from one generation to the next. A simple working definition of social institutions as used by social scientists is "... a socially prescribed system of differentiated behavior by means of which recurrent problems of societal living are resolved..."[1] The means by which culture replaces itself is obviously one of those recurrent problems. Viewing it in this context, one could say that education, as a social institution, is a creation of society and is responsive to the directions that other forces in the culture would require it to take. This means that basically the role it plays within a culture is a conservative one: it does what other forces in society ask it to do. In the Massachusetts Bay Colony, the law of 1648 stated:

> ...For as much as the good education of children is the singular behoof and benefit to any commonwealth, and whereas many parents and masters are too indulgent and negligent of their duty in that kind, it is therefore ordered...[2]

The Puritan fathers, worried that in a "wild new land" parents might experience some difficulty in raising their offspring properly, set up an educational system to aid or take on the task of "taming" the spirit of its youth. Education, as a social institution, has been shaped by society and in turn has had a great impact in shaping and changing the society around it.

American higher education, as a special part of the educational process, has played an especially important role in changing the culture around it. During early colonial times, the American college was a variation on institutions in England such as Oxford and Cambridge and tended to serve a very elite population. The college catered to a group of people who viewed themselves as English subjects in a strange land. The very rich sent their sons to college, while the "...middle and lower class...stayed home, farmed, went West..."[3] Despite this rather conservative makeup, the colonial college also spawned many of the leaders of the revolution.

After the revolution many of the leaders recognized the need for Americans being educated by Americans on American soil. Benjamin Rush, one of the signers of the Declaration of Independence, wrote an essay under a pseudonym in 1788 requesting that the government establish a national university and that only graduates of that university be allowed to hold office or be eligible for public service. He proposed that along with, or even before the country restored public credit, regulated its militia, built a navy, and extended its commerce, "...we should remove the ignorance and prejudices and change the habits of our citizens... By inspiring them with federal principles...which could only be effected by our young men meeting and spending two or three years together in a National University..."[4] Higher education viewed in this context can be seen as a tool utilized by society to solve its most important and pressing problems.

There are many examples of this role of higher education in the history of America. However, in the 1960s higher education was to play some rather unique roles in American society. It was to be both a catalyst for change and also the target of change agents. In some ways, it planted the seeds of its own difficulty. This paper reviews some major issues that emerged in the interplay of higher education and society in the 1960s and have continued or renewed relevance today.

In the late fifties and early sixties higher education was the most vocal critic of the elementary and secondary educational systems. Later it was to find itself the target of its own attack. The 1954 Supreme Court decision concerning education was going to force all of education to assume a role in solving a problem it was not prepared to take on.

Richard W. Boone began an address with the acknowledgment that

> We are a nation trapped by our rhetoric... Slowly we are being weighted down by our own myths... We are a nation which believes all problems are solvable... We are the doers... We have the biggest houses, highways, cars, television sets...[5]

In the strain toward consistency between the rhetoric and actual equal opportunity, education was asked to deliver on the American dream, that "anyone can make it if she/he tries." In a democratic society a major problem is the inconsistency between the encouragement to achieve and the realities of limited opportunity. This problem is resolved in different ways. Here in the United States we seem to prefer a system of "contest mobility":

(cont'd on page 2, col 1)

HIGHER EDUCATION . . . cont'd

> . . . Contest mobility is a system in which elite status is the prize in an open contest and is taken by the aspirant's own efforts. While the contest is governed by some rules of fair play, the contestants have wide latitude in the strategies they may employ . . . Contest mobility is like a sporting event in which many compete for a few recognized prizes. The contest is judged to be fair only if all the players compete on an equal footing. Victory must be won solely by one's own efforts . . . The most satisfactory outcome is not necessarily a victory of the most able but of the most deserving . . .[5]

One part of the contest for the rewards of life is to arm oneself with an education. In most cases this means a "thing" called a degree:

> When you have it, it entitles you to a job and a place in society. It is a commodity acquired with a special kind of currency—college credit—acceptable as a solid rate of exchange at the various institutions in an international network.[6]

The requirement of fairness is deeply rooted in the American value system, at least at the rhetorical level, and requires that all who are able be given the opportunity to obtain a degree. The wording of the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964 declared:

> . . . It is the policy of the United States to eliminate the paradox of poverty in the midst of plenty in this nation by opening to everyone the opportunity for education and training, the opportunity to work, and the opportunity to live in decency and dignity . . .[7]

It was the combination of these attitudes toward education, the social problems of the times, the reality of limited opportunity as opposed to the rhetoric of equal oportunity for all, and the history of education being a "panacea" for solving social problems, that placed higher education into the unique position it was to hold during the 1960s.

Integration was seen as a solution to some of the nation's problems and education was asked, unfortunately I believe, to handle the problem of segregation that existed in our society. When this is coupled with the equal opportunity problem, it is not hard to understand how programs such as the High School Equivalency Program (HEP) for migrant workers would be initiated on various college campuses. Upward Bound, too, was to appear as part of higher education's attempt at opening the paths to success in our society to those who had been traditionally bypassed. These social factors were thus uncomfortably fused with the three classic functions of higher education:

> . . . The more or less official doctrine is that the colleges provide liberal education—the general knowledge, the cultivated skills, the intellectual development needed by every man, and especially by the leaders of society. Their second function is to generate their own professors, and we are told that the man who can best convey liberal education is one who is actively engaged at the frontier of a specialized field . . . creating institutions on the German model, top-heavy in preoccupation with graduate studies and postgraduate scholarship . . .[8]

The graduate effort at most institutions made undergraduate education of secondary importance.

> Along with World War II came the third and now dominant function: commissioned work for public and private agencies. At M.I.T. or the University of Chicago only about fifteen to twenty percent of total income is derived from tuition: up to seventy percent is likely to come from government-sponsored research.[9]

Higher education was both affected by and had an effect on the civil rights movement. However, I think it responded to outside pressure rather than acting as a creative force for the movement. Rosa Parks' refusal to take a seat in the rear of a bus, the 1955 Supreme Court order that public school desegregation be carried out "with all deliberate speed," Daisy Bates' attempt to integrate Central High School in Little Rock—all were acts that affected higher education in a very fundamental way. The sit-ins and voting rights drives were supplied with manpower by the colleges and universities. This support in terms of rhetoric, money, and labor directly involved the institutions.

The social forces outside the institution of higher learning, coupled with what it saw as its own mission, created a strange mixture of attitudes and values for the 1960s. All of the institutions in our culture were undergoing change, and even though higher education offered leadership on the one hand, it was resisting change on the other.

In looking at the life cycle of social movements, the sociologist can identify four definite stages of development: (1) the preliminary stage—where a large number of people are discontented, feeling that something is wrong with their lives and believing that something should be done; (2) the popular stage—when the discontents begin to find each other, when groups with similar problems and feelings are able to communicate with each other. During this period two types of leaders appear: the prophet who outlines how things could be or should be and the reformer who pinpoints the problem of why they are not that way. When the prophets, the reformers, and a constituency—the discontents—find each other, the third stage of development begins. This stage, the formal period, is characterized by the outlining of an ideology, the selection of a hierarchy of leaders, and the establishment of some kind of organizational structure. The ideology tells the group who the enemy is and who its friends are. The fourth and final stage is

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DOXA (Gk., opinion, judgment) is published bimonthly by the Structured Year Program (SYP) Office of the State University of New York College at Old Westbury.

DOXA is distributed to English and Basic Studies departments and libraries of all State University (SUNY) and City University of New York (CUNY) units.

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institutionalization of the movement." Unless something occurs to abort the movement in its early period (most movements are not successful), the movement will take on a degree of permanency. If its ideology is not too narrowly defined and encompasses some rather broad principles, the group will form coalitions with other groups or movements and even receive the backing of conservative elements of the society.

While the discontents in our society had their beginning outside the institutions of higher learning, the college became the reservoir or meeting place of the discontents. It was on the college campuses that the prophet and the reformer were either born or came to find their constituency. A lot of the discontents were brought to the campus by government-sponsored research. The education of the so-called "disadvantaged" became big business. In fact any major institution of higher learning in the middle '60s that did not have a program for the "culturally deprived," a euphemism for Blacks, Puerto Ricans, and Chicanos, was not only missing out on a lot of research money, but was also labeled a "racist" institution. Since undergraduate education was not one of the more important functions of the university in the first place, new "talent" from outside the institution had to be brought in to service this new population. This new "talent" created problems immediately in that, even though they were educated by the university, they were not altogether in agreement with its three classic functions. In other words they were not academic types. Armed with the rhetoric of such publications as *Growing Up Absurd*, *Our Children Are Dying*, *Death at an Early Age*, *Dark Ghetto*, and many, many more, these new "instructors" brought the problems of the world right into the campus community.

Some even became those prophets and reformers so vital to the second stage of social movements. At first the institutions tried to isolate these unusual elements from the rest of the campus by placing them in "special programs" set off in corners or even off the main campuses. Storefronts, high schools, or any facilities that were available were put to use. The colleges and universities operated with complete naivete as to all the various forces at work within the society. Hindsight now tells us that it was impossible to expect the rest of the institution to maintain business as usual with these elements so near to its "heart." The students who came with these programs had no idea what to expect and in many cases were used by others to force changes in the university structure to service their own ends. One well-known "educator" who was recruiting Black students called them "cultural impactors" who would save his educationally unsound program from forced extinction which university administrators had planned.

Other important events were taking place outside the institutions that were to have a great impact on the colleges' clientele. John F. Kennedy was elected president with a tremendous appeal to the youth of the country. His idea of a new frontier and a commitment to "activism"—"Ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country"—was the attitude that seemed to pervade the youth culture. His subsequent assassination, which was viewed in living color through a now grown-up medium, television, had a shock-wave effect on the nation, especially its youth. Lyndon B. Johnson's escalating of the Vietnam war, while trying to create his great society, ironically kept up the activism of youth by supplying it with a cause.

Allow me to recap some of the factors that came together on college and university campuses:

- The role of education as a social institution within our culture. Its responsiveness to the needs of the community.
- The special character of higher education—it was both responsive and creative in terms of the social forces around it.
- A view of education as the "panacea" for solving any problem within the society.
- "Contest mobility" as a means of passing out the rewards of society, with the college degree being the best indicator of having won the contest.
- The American value of "equal opportunity for all of the people."
- The push for civil rights and legislation to that effect in the fifties and sixties.
- Segregation identified as a major social problem during the period by the government itself.
- Given the three functions of higher education, with an emphasis on the third, government would ask education to solve its problem of segregation, equal opportunity, and social mobility.
- The colleges serving as a meeting place for the "discontents" of our society, with a tendency toward activism, certainly acted as a breeding ground for action. The view that the war in Vietnam was unjust.
- The college's ignorance in handling the social problems and its naiveté in bringing together these various unstable elements.

While I certainly have not exhausted the list, I think you get the picture of an *olla podrida* (stew) brewing. These strange ingredients would combine to produce many changes within the institution.

One important element that I have left out of the "pot" until now is the appearance of the "Black militant." My reason for excluding him/her is that I believe she/he was made, at least in part, by the "pot." The institution's response, or lack of response, to the needs of Black students led to a series of demands and confrontations between the university and the Black students. One of the outcomes of forced integration was the instant militant. Blacks on college campuses had been considered rare products by their white counterparts, and were usually treated with a kind of "specialness." That is, they were thought to be an exception to the standard rule of how you were supposed to relate to Blacks. However, with the increase in numbers they now had a critical mass and began to change the social and academic life on the campus. With the rhetoric of equality, all white groups needed a few Blacks around to grant them some kind of liberal legitimacy, but when they came in numbers large enough to control or affect the organization, they were rejected. It did not take long for the Blacks to set up parallel structures to serve their own needs. Also, the civil rights effort had directed its appeal at the "conscience" of the whites and found that many of them had none.

It takes a while to make a militant out of a "middle-class Negro," but the academic institutions were able, by demonstra-

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tion, to make him/her forget all home training and to strike back. The lack of progress by the civil rights movement in obtaining better living conditions for the Black community was felt by many Blacks at large to be the result of the wrong approach, and violence erupted in the major cities across the country. On the campuses this created a demand by Blacks that "it takes one to teach one." The early leaders, the liberal whites who were considered "Black experts," were forced to give up leadership roles as Blacks became increasingly difficult to control. The institutions made a political response to an educational problem and brought onto the campus the Black instructor and administrator. This added a new ingredient to the already seething mixture. The result was one grouping among the Blacks, another among the whites, and even another among the women. The defense contracts and the ROTC were the primary targets of the white radicals, but the Blacks attacked two bastions of western culture: the social sciences and the humanities. The institutions responded quickly with a rash of "Black studies programs" that in the main had political value, but very little educational rationale. At the State University of New York's College at Old Westbury, a group of ten white college women, none older than age 25, formed 16 chapters of women's liberation groups simply by using the college as a base.

While these groups sometimes worked at different ends of a continuum, they all seemed to grow out of the same rhetoric. Their attacks on the institution and the endless forays out into the community certainly changed the college's image, which had been one of awe shrouded in a kind of magical mystique. The new image was probably nearer the truth, but had a negative connotation. The institution's inability to handle its student population or its faculty pointed out its vulnerability and frailty.

Many others found the campus a meeting place for their discontent and through a sharing of experiences began to identify and form various groups. A friend who became the president of a community college related to me how he had gone out of his way to answer all the demands of the Blacks, Chicanos, white radicals, women liberationists, and the Gay liberation front. He was shocked when he found his office occupied by the Asian coalition. The other groups quickly condemned him for his injustice to the latter and joined in the protest. Herbert Gans, in an article entitled, "The Equality Revolution," speaks to this phenomenon. His thesis is that the new wave of social protest, while beginning with the have-nots demanding equality in an economic sense, will culminate in the real revolution coming from the rather well-to-do segments of our society, i.e., white women, white youth, the white working class, with demands for more of a share in the power in politics, social status, job situations, and simply the right to self-determination in all areas." The students who caused the explosions at Columbia, Harvard, Brandeis, Sarah Lawrence, Berkeley, or the dozens of other elitist schools, were not poor and academically deprived.

In acting as social critic and as meeting place for the various elements that were to start a series of social movements that have yet to run their course, the institution itself was transformed in such a way that it will never be possible for it to resume "business as usual." Each of the movements spawned on the campus continues to make fundamental changes in the society at large. These changes will also force higher education to play a different role in the future. Some of the initial responses made by higher education to the turbulence of the 60s were simply knee-jerk reactions to keep itself afloat, rather than the result of careful, long-range planning. American higher education is thoroughly capable of adapting to fundamental change. In fact, I think it can solve the problems posed by the students and by the needs of society at large.

However, there is one problem it cannot solve. Higher education exposed its soft underbelly to the segment of society that gives it its support, those rather conservative political elements, which see some danger in college students and want them controlled. During the 60s a credibility gap was opened that questioned whether or not education left to its own devices would be able to do its job effectively. These political forces are demanding that higher education be more accountable than in the past and are taking away the very flexibility needed to cope with the changing times. The administration and faculty are being forced into a management–employee relationship. Long-range plans are less educationally inspired than industrial, cost-analysis schemes that are concerned primarily with what kind of a return can be gotten on the investment.

Since the early 70s we have seen unprecedented growth in the junior or community college. These two-year institutions are part of higher education's attempt to cope with the open admissions policy that was imposed upon it during the 60s, mechanisms designed to protect the more prestigious four-year institutions. I see a dual purpose here: (1) protection from the masses who come via open admissions and (2) the phenomenon Burton Clark called the "cooling out" function in higher education. Again, I remind you of "contest mobility." This system has failure built into it, since only a few can emerge as the "elite" in our society. (Erving Goffman's "Cooling the Mark Out" is the sociological label for it.) This means that while some students of low promise become successful, for large numbers failure is inevitable and *structured*. In a system of "contest mobility," if you train many for elite status and only have room for a few, you create a cadre of educated discontents. The "cooling-out process" handles this problem by failing all but a select few and at the same time convincing those who fail that it is their fault and not due to inadequacies within the system. In other words, the failures must be convinced that they should not become critical of the process, but accept an alternative route or work harder to ensure that their children or others of their kind will be successful.

The structured failure is "cooled out" in these ways:

> . . . 1. Alternative achievement—substitute avenues may be made to appear not too different from what was given up, particularly as to status . . . Here one does not fail but rectifies a mistake.
>
> 2. Gradual disengagement—by a gradual series of steps, movement to a goal may be stalled, self-assessment encouraged, and evidence produced of performance.
>
> 3. Objective denial–reorientation is, finally, confrontation by the facts. A record of poor performance helps to detach the organization and its agents from the emotional aspects of the cooling-out work.

> 4 • Agents of consolation—counselors are available who are patient with the overly ambitious . . . and work to change their intentions. . . counseling is to reduce aspiration as well as to define and help fulfill it.
>
> 5. Avoidance of standards— . . . While a hard attitude toward failure generally allows a single set of criteria, a soft treatment assumes that many kinds of ability are valuable, *each in its place*. Proper classification and placement are then paramount while standards become relative.

Higher education, like the society at large, is having a difficult time. Unless it can fend off those forces outside the institution that want to use it for repressive political reasons, higher education will not survive as we know it. Yet with its dual role of innovator and defender of the status quo, I think it has a positive role to play in making the future a better time. A statement by Judson Jerome more than a decade ago still seems to be relevant today:

> American higher education is thoroughly capable of adapting to fundamental change, if only it will. It is a pity that those of us involved must be scared into change by outbreaks of anarchy. It is a pity we cannot more willingly take advantage of our students, and the bewilderment of a society in the throes of revolutionary change. It is a pity we cannot show intellectual initiative rather than panic and rigidity when the need is so great and the possibilities so abundant.[14]

I would like to add that I think higher education can adapt and will, if provided with the freedom and resources to do so.

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